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Reports on Oman Kick Up Sandstorm

Some of our recent columns have kicked up a sandstorm in the strategic sultanate of Oman, and the dust still hasn't settled.

We reported that the Air Force has been quietly negotiating an agreement to give a British firm the multimillion-dollar contract to operate three U.S.-built bases—and the super-secret equipment they will eventually contain—in Oman, near the approaches to the Persian Gulf.

Afterward, Lt. Gen. John T. Chain Jr., chief of the State Department's bureau of politico-military affairs, flew to Oman to review Omani-U.S. affairs. An angry Omani foreign minister erroneously accused him of having been our source.

The Air Force, meanwhile, has used one excuse after another to stall the implementation of the contract, which was supposed to have been signed months ago.

Chain reportedly told the British they would not get access to U.S. communications and other sensitive equipment at the Omani bases.

Pentagon sources say the Air Force has just asked for an additional 90-day delay in awarding the contract. But there seems little likelihood that the deal can be undone, since the sultan of Oman and his British advisers insist the British firm get the contract.

The concern inside the Pentagon is that sensitive military and intelligence information would necessarily come into the hands of the civilian contractor who maintains the base. For example, in the event of a U.S. decision to use the Omani bases for their intended purpose—as staging areas for U.S. rapid deployment forces—the contractor

would need to know in advance. The British company that has been secretly tapped for the contract on an ostensibly competitive basis, Airwork Ltd., tried to defuse the objections by taking on an American company, Vinnell Corp., as a partner. But Vinnell was apparently signed on mainly as window dressing.

Here, meanwhile, is what our sources have told us about the situation:

■ The driving force behind the award of the contract to Airwork-Vinnell is British Air Vice Marshal Erik Bennett, a tough-minded Ulsterman on leave from the Royal Air Force to serve as commander of the sultan's air force. He has had extensive Middle East experience, including a stint as adviser to the Jordanian air force.

■ Vinnell's selection as junior partner may have been helped by the presence on its board of directors of John West, former U.S. ambassador to Saudi Arabia. While he was ambassador, the Saudi desk at the State Department was manned by John Countryman, the current U.S. ambassador to Oman.

Even more interesting is our sources' report that a major stockholder in Vinnell is linked closely to Ghassan Shakir, a Saudi businessman who is a close adviser to the sultan of Oman. A businessman described Shakir as a key behind-the-scenes power in Vinnell. Neither Shakir nor a Vinnell representative was available for comment.

Despite the Air Force's belated qualms over the contract, the Omani government has already been notified that Airwork-Vinnell got it. Countryman reportedly confirmed this at a recent business lunch in Muscat.